

Woodstock Ingersoll Echo

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FARM EDITION 2025

2024 Oxford Stewardship Award goes to Gord and Lisa Ross

STAFF

Woodstock Ingersoll Echo

Oxford County Warden Marcus Ryan presented Gord and Lisa Ross with the 2024 Oxford Stewardship Award this morning to recognize their efforts toward land improvement and sustainability.

Gord and Lisa Ross have made tremendous efforts towards land stewardship at their South-West Oxford property. The Ross's have done several stewardship projects over the past 13 years and were honoured with this award thanks to recent efforts to plant over 2,500 trees to create windbreaks along the north and western boundaries. They also created a new woodlot in a 1.3-acre section of land on the corner of the property to link the two windbreaks and create a continuous wildlife path. The new woodlot is adjacent to a meadow and next to a neighbour's woodlot to create a more extensive wildlife habitat.

Three short-listed candidates were finalists for the award, chosen from a pool of projects supported by the Clean Water Program. The program, funded by Oxford County and administered by the Upper Thames River Conservation Authority and the Grand River Conservation Authority, promotes water quality improvement and woodland and wetland conservation and enhancement. The finalists undertook various land improvements this year to protect the local environment.



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Left to right are April Nix, Oxford County; Rob Davies, Upper Thames River Conservation Authority; award winners Lisa Ross and Gord Ross; and Cher Sprague, Stewardship Oxford.

Oxford County is honouring this year's Oxford Stewardship Award recipient with a \$500 gift certificate to purchase original artwork commissioned from an Oxford County artist of their choice or an experience at a local destination featured through Tourism Oxford. In addition to this prize, Lisa and Gord Ross

have been added to the recognition wall at the Oxford County Administration Building, designed to honour all past and future recipients of the Oxford Stewardship Award.

The winner of the Oxford Stewardship Award is chosen by representatives of local stewardship organizations, with Marinda Gras, Soil and Crop Improvement Association, and Cher Sprague, Stewardship Oxford, leading the judging process.

Also nominated were Debra and Gord Eddy from East-Zorra Tavistock and Joe and Susan Hampson of Norwich Township.

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Customers the ultimate judges, but Royal Winter Fair awards also welcome for Gunn's Hill Cheese

JEFF TRIBE

Echo Correspondent

A company's customers are the ultimate judges.

But a little positive feedback from sanctioned competitions never hurts.

"No matter what, it's always good to hear back," said Gunn's Hill Cheese co-founder and head cheesemaker Shep Ysselstein after victories in the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair's Flavoured Cheese, Not Smoked, and Flavoured Cheese, Smoked categories.

"And the other nice thing is, when you win a competition, it gives people an excuse to try something that may be new to them."

Ysselstein took the latter approach with cheese-making, particularly Swiss cheese-making, becoming interested in the craft through growing up on an Oxford Centre-area family dairy farm that now supplies his operation. He went to the heart of the Alps to learn his craft, spending a memorable summer helping tend and milk a 30-head dairy herd on Swiss mountainsides. Milk was collected in buckets via a mobile tie-stall system, poured into milk cans and then transported to an area cheese-making facility.

Despite a gruelling summer of work, he returned to Canada inspired rather than discouraged.

"That's where it all began."

Ysselstein and partner Colleen Bator combined family dairy experience, season of authentic Swiss cheese-making, subsequent cheese-making instruction, and also importantly, a business degree, into the founding of Gunn's Hill Cheese in 2010. Their original line featured Five Brothers, a hand-crafted washed rind product reminiscent of Gouda and Swiss Appenzeller; Handeck, a version paying homage to the Swiss mountain cheeses he made in Europe; Oxford's Harvest, a milder, creamier offering modelled after Swiss Mutchsli; and highly-popular curds.

All four remain staples in Gunn's Hills current 20-25-variety range of offerings, a lengthy list including flavoured versions of the originals, Brigid's Brie named in honour of Colleen's late Irish mother, Dark Side of the Moo (Mutchsli-style soaked for four days in Dark Side Chocolate Stout from Woodstock's Upper Thames Brewing Company) along with buffalo (Buffalo Bliss) and sheep-milk (Shepherd's Harvest) cheeses they craft for or others. They, and a selection of other local products are available for sale on-site at the cheese shop, located at 445172 Gunn's Hill Road as well as hundreds of other locations around the province.

Admittedly, a competition is not a competition. Some have more entries, some differing numbers of judges, some admittedly more or less



(JEFF TRIBE PHOTO)

Gunn's Hill Cheese co-founder and cheesemaker Shep Ysselstein shows off the Five Brothers Smoked (in his right hand) and Topsy (left) cheeses which won their categories at the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair this fall.

prestigious. But results can be important, a 2013 category victory for Five Brothers at the high-end 2013 Canadian Cheese Grand Prix competition sponsored by the Dairy Farmers of Canada provided an element of early credibility to Gunn's Hill's products, and every win provides a boost. Cheese is judged on a combination of technical attributes, salinity and texture for example, as well as a technical term which comes down to flavour: 'nice earthy, nutty undertones' compared to, for example, less-attractive 'barny' characteristics.

Gunn's Hill Royal Fair winners included Topsy, Oxford Harvest soaked in Palatine Hills Cabernet Merlot for four days before being aged for three to four months; and also Five Brothers Smoked, as the name indicates, Five Brothers cheese vacuum sealed to age. After eight months, 30 to 40 wheels are cold-smoked with applewood for eight hours.

"It gets that nice natural smoke flavour," said Ysselstein. "Apple tends to go best with cheese - hickory or mesquite can be too intense."

Gunn's Hill also picked up a pair of American Cheese Society awards earlier in the year, Dark Side of the Moo finishing first in its category, and Five Brothers second. Gunn's Hill is judicious with competition entries, limiting numbers and often using the opportunity to get external assessment on new products.

"You always get some feedback on them," Shep explained, which is an important part of the desire for improvement, important whether at the beginning of a company's existence or 14 years in.

"You can't just let it go," said Ysselstein. "We've got to continually focus on doing better, always trying to do a little better."

And while competitions are part of that ongoing challenge, customer appreciation remains the biggest win.

"It's still always fun to see people enjoying our cheese," Ysselstein concluded. "That's what keeps it exciting."

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Oxford County farmer ahead of his time receives honour

LEE GRIFFI

Editor

Donald Wallace Hart may not be alive to attend his induction into the Ontario Agricultural Hall of Fame but his memory as someone who pioneered soil management continues to live on.

Hart, who farmed in East Zorra-Tavistock, passed away in 2014 and was a leader in developing conservation tillage systems, leaving a significant and lasting impact on the quality and sustainability of Ontario farmland.

Hart's son Bob said he feels a sense of pride with what his father accomplished and added his pivot into cash cropping couldn't have been a better decision.

"I think it's a tremendous honour and very well deserved. He was a leader in soil conservation and sustainable farming before sustainable farming became a common term. His father, Douglas Hart, is also in the Hall of Fame for his work in the dairy industry. My dad started as a dairy farm and hated it so he went into beef feedlot operator before starting with cash crops."

Hart graduated from the Ontario Agricultural College in 1953 and in the 1960s, observed soil degradation caused by monoculture corn crops and moldboard plow tillage. Driven by this concern, he sought out like-minded individuals to find solutions. This group, informally known as the Oxford Group, became leaders in soil conservation in Oxford County and across the province.

"He was always willing to try new and different things. He recognized that planting corn year after year after year monoculture corn was causing problems and he wanted to do something about it. The group of them were look-



(BOB HART PHOTO)

Former EZT farmer Donald Wallace Hart will be inducted into the Ontario Agricultural Hall of Fame at a ceremony in Elora in June.

ing for ways to do better," explained Bob.

Recognizing the benefits of leaving crop residue on the surface to reduce soil erosion and build organic matter, he brought the concept back to Ontario, claiming to have performed the province's first chisel plowing on his farm.

Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, Hart was a sought-after speaker at farm meetings across Ontario, con-

sistently encouraging farmers to explore new methods for improving the long-term health and productivity of their soil.

"He hosted a lot of government-type people and talked about what he was doing and why he was doing it. He really enjoyed working with young farmers who had questions and were sincerely interested dad always had time to talk, give different views and put some different options out there."

Bob followed in his father's footsteps and farmed full-time until about 12 years ago.

"My brother and I had started a business called a seed business called Ag-works. We merged with another company to form Sevita International so I ended up working full-time there and Doug carried on farming. His sons farm and my boys work at Sevita."

Hart's farm was located at the current Sevita, north of Woodstock on Highway 59.

"He was a humble guy. He was never one to jump into the limelight but he was always happy to share if somebody was interested. He was very concerned about the long-term viability of cash crop farming in Ontario. I think he absolutely made a difference."

Bob added chisel plowing became one of the main practices for a long time in the province.

"Maybe not so much anymore, it's kind of moved on a little bit. But it was the big thing for a long time and he was largely responsible for getting it going."

Hart and two other deserving farmers will be inducted at a ceremony on Sunday, June 5 at the GrandWay Events Centre in Elora. More information is available at www.oahf.on.ca.

The organization's mission is to acknowledge, record and preserve the contributions made by leaders to the growth and development of Ontario's agriculture and agri-food industry. To date, 262 people have been inducted.



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Farmers Lung can be an often overlooked condition

LUKE EDWARDS

Echo Contributor

Often thought of as the cause of little more than a temporary irritant, the musty air many farmers contend with on a daily basis can lead to issues far more serious than many realize.

Farmer's Lung is a condition that should remain a concern for those in the agriculture community, even if it's taken a backseat in recent years. If ignored, it can worsen over time and lead to a farmer losing lung capacity or even requiring a lung transplant. This winter, Workplace Safety and Prevention Services sent out a post to raise awareness of the risks.

Ryan Dick, a health and safety consultant for WSPS, compiled a resource sheet of information from various sources outlining what farmer's lung is, how it affects people and how to mitigate exposure.

"Take those extra steps to make sure your tomorrows are going to be fine," he said.

Dick grew up on a farm, and still runs a goat operation in eastern Ontario where he lives. Looking

back, he thinks he may have been exposed to it as a child.

"I'm pretty sure I was exposed to this as a kid because I had one year where I couldn't do anything with the hay," he said. Like most, he figured it was just hay fever, but now he's not so sure.

He's become much more aware of it now, however, and not just because his role in the health and safety world, but having seen one of his children experience similar symptoms while working on the farm.

According to a page devoted to the condition on the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety website, "farmer's lung is an allergic disease usually caused by breathing in the dust from mouldy hay. However, dust from any mouldy crop - straw, corn, silage, grain, or even tobacco - can also cause farmer's lung."

While there's a seeming lack of awareness as well as a dearth of recent research into farmer's lung, Dick's resource sheet offered up some information that could help.

Late winter to early spring seems to be when

issues with farmer's lung peak, he said, which is when hay has had time to become mouldy and bottom layers are being fed.

Like many conditions, the early stages of farmer's lung seem relatively innocuous, with symptoms having been described as similar to a nagging cold.

However, if ignored it can eventually cause permanent lung damage. As it worsens, a farmer might begin to notice shortness of breath that makes strenuous work more difficult. It can get to the point where something as simple as getting out of a chair is a challenge.

Other symptoms include: fever, chills, a dripping nose, irritating and harassing cough, blood-streaked sputum, difficult breathing with a tightness in the chest, crackling breathing, muscular pain and depression.

Oftentimes farmers will just assume it's the flu or a cold and let the symptoms run their course. However, even a visit to a doctor may not yield a farmer's lung diagnosis since the farmer might not connect their illness to their work, and the doctor may not think to ask.



(LUKE EDWARDS PHOTO)

Advancements in best practices can reduce the risk of farmer's lung, but operators should still be aware of the risks mouldy hay can present to long term health.

"It's so difficult to diagnose," he said.

Symptoms of an acute farmer's lung attack can linger as long as two weeks, but usually decrease after 12 hours. Severe attacks can last 12 weeks.

If a farmer is continually exposed to large amounts of mouldy dust and has several acute attacks over a period of years, they can

develop a chronic form of farmer's lung. This can lead to increasing shortness of breath with occasional mild fever and usually a significant loss of weight with general lack of energy. This can last for months and is also marked by permanent lung damage.

Dick said there isn't much information on how many people in Canada suffer from farmer's lung, however it is most common in regions with wet weather at harvest time. It's also more common on dairy farms, "especially those not equipped with automated equipment for handling hay or feed," according to the CCOHS.

However, the organization pointed out it can affect a wide variety of people, including: grain handlers, stable employees, poultry workers, attendants of zoo and circus animals and pet shop workers. Even city people who occasionally visit stables can be at risk.

Farmers working with loose hay out in the field have a relatively low risk. However, they can quickly inhale large amounts of dust when working with hay in a confined space.

Fortunately, there are best practices that can reduce risk. And in many cases, these practices fit

in with other efforts to improve the overall operation of the farm.

Avoiding crop spoilage is the first step in reducing the risk, Dick said. Other tips include: drying wet hay, grain and crops at harvest (an effective but often challenging solution, Dick admits), storing hay with a high risk of spoilage in silage instead of bales, ventilating buildings that have a lot of dusty material, mechanizing chores that involve handling hay and feed, wetting down barns and stables before cleaning them to prevent the spores from becoming airborne, and finally, the use of properly fitted respirators.

The natural evolution of farming practices has helped in some ways. Moving to larger bales that are handled primarily by tractors reduces the risk of contact, for instance.

"Overall, we're handling the hay less, we know how to store it better," he said.

Dick encourages farmers and those who work on farms to consider adopting practices to reduce the risk of breathing in those damaging spores. WSPS has a resource hub for farmer's lung on its website, wsps.ca.



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Tar spot a concern for Ontario corn growers, but there are solutions

LUKE EDWARDS

Echo Contributor

It may be an issue that needs to be on the mind of every corn grower in Ontario now, but fortunately there are ready-made solutions to the widespread arrival of tar spot.

“Really, tar spot is everyone’s problem now,” said Emma Dieleman, an agronomist with Sygenta. Dieleman was one of the presenters at the joint annual general meeting of the Niagara and Haldimand Soil and Crop Improvement Associations. She was one of several in attendance to discuss the fungal disease that has expanded to affect essentially all of the northern corn belt.

While the spread of the disease may seem concerning, Dieleman and others said there’s no need to panic.

“Management fits really well into what we’re already doing,” she said.

Existing fungicides can be quite useful, and timing of application can fit in with spraying for other fungal issues like DON, Dieleman said. And most of the time, one pass is sufficient.

And since growers south of the border have been dealing with tar spot for a decade or so, new genetics are starting to become available that will provide

better resistance. Already, she said certain hybrid varieties show considerably more resistance, and Dieleman encouraged growers to consider tar spot resistance in their annual seed planning.

“Considering tar spot susceptibility is going to be super important going forward,” she said.

The fungus was first confirmed in Ontario in 2020, but has now spread throughout the province. It can look similar to other diseases, but includes raised black lesions on the leaf surface that can’t be rubbed off. It tends to start on the lower canopy and move up.

Cooler temperatures, high relative humidity, lots of dew and saturated soils are other conditions that tar spot loves.

When those conditions are right, farmers will begin to notice symptoms within about two weeks.

“And the cycle continues as long as we have the right conditions,” Dieleman said.

However, farmers are also fortunate in that it seems as though it’s the early part of the growing season is the most worrisome. A late infection offers limited risk, Dieleman said.

In a later Q and A panel, local agronomists said tar spot was one of the sub-



(PIXABAY PHOTO)

Tar spot is now a province-wide concern for corn growers in Ontario. However, there are effective ways to deal with the fungal infection.

jects that often came up during discussions with farmers planning ahead for 2025.

“Tar spot was part of the conversation, but it isn’t the only thing we should

be paying attention to,” said Stephanie Fletcher of Twenty View Farms.

Others agreed, saying tar spot often came up in discussions, but yield continued to lead the charge.

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'Buffalo Ben' shares his passion for bison with Thamesford-area wagon tours

JEFF TRIBE

Echo Correspondent

'Buffalo Ben' Van Hasstert enjoys sharing his passion for bison by offering wagon tours through his Thamesford-area herd's paddock.

Large, powerful animals deeply steeped in Canadian history never fail to impress visitors, an intimate experience typically including up close and personal views. But of all the guests Van Hasstert has hosted, one's appreciation stands out.

Fred Eaglespeaker is a First Nations chief from Saskatchewan, stopped by Van Hasstert's 255395 25th Line, Thamesford farm during a visit to family in Ingersoll.

"He told me, these bison are happy that you were born," Van Hasstert recalled with a smile.

Eaglespeaker's tour included a sacred ritual involving tobacco, the earth and a chant, with growing emotion clear on his face.

"Within a minute, tears were running down his cheeks," said Van Hasstert. "That's how deep that animal lives in their culture."

"For me, that was very special."

Van Hasstert has enjoyed a love affair with bison since receiving a small, plastic toy as a six-year-old child in The Netherlands. North America hosted somewhere between 20 and 50 million bison before European arrival with massive herds providing Indigenous people both sustenance and shelter. A long-time student of the species, Van Hasstert learned of their sub-

sequent slaughter to virtual extinction. Beyond settler hunting for food and sport and the arrival of the railroads, 'the big kill' for buffalo robes happened in the 1870s. By 1900, beyond zoos and farms, only a few were left roaming the prairies, some in Yellowstone National Park and a couple of hundred wood bison on Elk Island in Alberta.

From this perilous precipice, bison numbers have been rebuilt to roughly 700,000 in Canada and the United States. Having studied the species for virtually his entire life, his dream of possessing his own herd was realized a decade ago. After 38 years as a dairy farmer, his retirement property featured lowland pasture, a perfectly framed view from their home's window he could imagine including bison.

"I never thought this could happen," said Van Hasstert, who started with the purchase of 11 bison yearlings from an established producer near Hagersville. Currently, his herd numbers around 40, the majority being cows and calves with one breeding bull. Ninety-nine per cent organic pasture-raised bison meat is for sale through Van Hasstert's on-farm market. He offers government-inspected vacuum-packed ground bison, roasts, steaks and pepperettes, alluding to a flavour slightly sweeter than beef.

Mature cows weigh in between 1,200 and 1,400 pounds, while an older bull can run from 2,000 to 3,000. Despite their large size, bison are extremely quick and agile and able to reach and maintain a speed of 55 kilometres an hour



(JEFF TRIBE PHOTO)

'Buffalo Ben' Van Hasstert's 'retirement project' from 38 years as a dairy farmer is a 40-member bison herd at his 255395 25th Line, Thamesford property. He offers a limited amount of bison meat for sale at an on-farm market as well as wagon tours of the paddock. Those seeking more information on either are invited to call or text 519-608-3020.

with an extremely short runway. They are also unpredictable and can be aggressive, particularly bulls.

"Where is he?" Van Hasstert asked, glancing around as we drove into the paddock to deposit a bale of hay in a feeder. "He stood by the cab door yesterday," he continued, as the bull approached from behind, slowly and regally circling the tractor to the right. "I just waited until he decided to move."

With the bull safely on the other side of the vehicle, we cautiously exited the cab, Ben cutting plastic wrap off the bale while I snapped a few photos of the herd sire. Aware of my presence, heads went up, the group retreating to a copse of trees to the west.

"You're strange," Van Hasstert explained. "They aren't sure about you."

When bringing tour customers in his high, homemade wagon, he approaches the herd extremely slowly and cautiously. Groups ranging from two to 18 riders are instructed to speak only quietly and make no sudden movements.

"I stop the ride and start feeding the bison treats," said Van Hasstert, of animals which typically circle the wagon. "You are almost surrounded, which is a very nice experience. Then

people can take pictures or video."

Bison are unpredictable, often hanging out for 15 or 20 minutes.

"Another time it's only ten minutes," said Van Hasstert, who follows their departure with a history lesson, and then answers riders' questions. He tailors tours to customer appreciation, longer for those retaining interest, moving on when people are satisfied with their experience. Younger guests tend to have a shorter attention span, older children and adults, longer.

"The ride takes up to an hour. It depends on the questions I get."

Bison rides are weather-dependent in the sense too much rain can preclude vehicles entering and cutting deep ruts in the paddock's muddy ground. It's also arguably more fun in the sun, although a little drizzle certainly won't ruin an experience that can include Van Hasstert setting up tables for visitors wishing to bring a picnic.

Those interested in purchasing bison meat or scheduling a tour, most often during July and August when the weather should be at its best and calves are born, are invited to call or text 519-608-3020 for more information.

"It can be a family outing," Van Hasstert concluded. "And coupled with that, a bison ride."

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Young Hickson area farmers making a go of it in small-scale poultry and beef production

GALEN SIMMONS

Echo Contributor

For young farmers starting out, navigating the agricultural landscape and building a sustainable commodity production business can be a slow, tricky road to travel.

Just outside of Hickson in East Zorra-Tavistock, two young farmers – Manita and Brandon La Rose – are balancing full-time jobs and their on-farm duties as they work to gain their footing in the poultry and beef production business at Windrose Farm.

“I grew up on a dairy farm, so I’ve always kind of been in farming,” Manita La Rose said. “Then when we got married, we got a place in town, just outside of Woodstock ... right before COVID. We only had two neighbours, no one in the front and no one in the back, but after a couple of years, it’s kind of like you go home and there’s nothing to do. ... It’s like there was something missing.”

Though Brandon La Rose didn’t grow up on a farm, he has farming in his genes and was raised in the country, so the pair quickly decided they wanted to return to their agricultural roots and find a property where they could have animals to take care of in the barn and enough space to grow a big garden and crops to feed them.

It took a while, but after walking away from multiple opportunities to purchase properties within their limited budget a little farther away from home, they settled on their current farm property, just 10-15 minutes down the road from the dairy farm operated by Manita La Rose’s family.

“It’s kind of central to most of the people we know,” Brandon La Rose said. “Her family farms two or three concessions over near Tavistock, so her dad can rent the land that we can’t use or haven’t grown into yet.”

“We share equipment with my dad; if he needs something planted, we’ll hop in the tractor and plant it for him with his equipment,” Manita La Rose added. “And we help out on the home farm, too, when we can, when it’s really busy.”

When they first started looking at farm properties in the area, the vision was to start their own commercial-poultry operation. While there was some support available, Manita La Rose said the startup cost for the chickens was well beyond what they could afford.

“The cost of the startup is just insane. ... Usually, people have a hog operation on the side that helps pay for it to get it going. Once you get the chickens going, once you’re in, once you’ve paid off the quota, it’s a great system to be in, but it’s really hard to get into,” Manita La Rose said. “To buy a farm and build the chicken barn and buy the quota was just a lot.”

Instead, the La Roses set their sights



(GALEN SIMMONS PHOTO)

Manita and Brandon La Rose operate a combined poultry and beef farm, Windrose Farm, near Hickson in East Zorra-Tavistock.

on the Chicken Farmers of Ontario’s (CFO) artisanal chicken program, which allows small-scale producers like the La Roses to raise larger quantities of meat chickens – between 600 and 3,000 – to sell at farmers’ markets, and to butcher shops and restaurants.

“The first year we were here, we just missed the deadline (for that program) because we closed on the farm in March and that was the due date to get into the program,” Manita La Rose said. “There’s another program called the family food program from CFO (through which) you can raise your own chickens and it’s more for your own personal consumption for family and friends. There’s more limitations to that; you can’t advertise outside of on your farm. ... You can’t post on Facebook or anything like that.”

After operating in their first year under that program, the La Roses were sure poultry farming was the route they wanted to follow. With minimal renovations to the existing barn on the property – which had an insulated equipment-storage area almost perfect for brooding chickens and raising chicks – and a mobile Quonset-style chicken coop behind the barn that allows the couple to rotate where the chickens forage for bugs and other natural food sources, they successfully applied to the artisanal chicken program the following year and vastly increased their production capacity.

In addition to raising chickens, the La Roses also work with Manita La Rose’s father raising beef cattle.

“We butchered a cow not this past Christmas, but the Christmas before,” Manita La Rose said. “We had one lady buy a quarter cow and the rest we just pieced out to people who wanted individual cuts. Steaks and the ground beef went really quick, and then we were left with a lot of roasts. Moving forward, we’ll change gears a little bit and see if we can sell more quarter-cows and half-

cows, and then we’ll try and butcher a cow consistently every year.”

Currently, the Windrose Farm beef herd resides at Manita La Rose’s father’s Holstein dairy farm. When her father has a cow in his herd with genetics he doesn’t want for future generations, he’ll mate that cow with an Angus bull, so the resultant calf will be part Holstein and part Angus, allowing the

couple to raise it and ultimately butcher it for beef.

“He basically loans us a few cows over the summer – helps us keep the pastures – and then, if we sell one cow, two cows, whatever – they’re going to the butcher – we buy them off him at that point and the rest of the cows go back to dad’s farm and he sells them for beef at the stock market,” Manita La Rose said.

The La Rose’s already grow hay at Windrose Farms, which they use to feed their cows, and eventually they hope to have their own herd of beef cows at their farm fulltime.

“It’s nice that way because we can work with family but, at the same time, we can help each other out,” Manita La Rose said.

In looking to the future of their farm, Manita and Brandon La Rose both hope to make farming their fulltime jobs, continuing to promote the importance of buying local, and understanding and connecting to the food we eat.

By caring for the land they’ve purchased and raising their animals with both environmental sustainability and animal welfare in mind, they are doing their part in ensuring the food we eat is safe, healthy, affordable and, most importantly, 100 per-cent Canadian.

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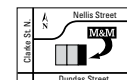
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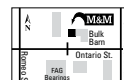
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Greener Pastures Eco Farm's project with Ducks Unlimited restoring a pond and a dream

EMILY STEWART

Echo Correspondent

Carl and Andrea VanRooyen, owners of Greener Pastures Eco Farm, always wanted to create a farm on their property but didn't think it was possible when they first operated.

Now, the farm on 774766 Oxford Road 14, Woodstock, is working with Ducks Unlimited to restore wetlands during the spring. The pond will be part of Greener Pastures' mandate to practice sustainable farming.

"Our farm has always kind of centered around regenerative farming practices, so the idea of consistently improving the land and using those practices of leaving it better than we found it," Andrea said. "Part of that centers around things like biodiversity, native species, pollinator-friendly planting, things like that."

Wetland on the property will conserve water and sequester carbon. Greener Pastures Eco Farm has cows grazing the field to capture carbon, but wetlands are more efficient and effective in the process.

"The aquatic plants will break down in the water, but the absence of oxygen means they're really slow breakdown and will actually put it into the ground



(CARL AND ANDREA VANROOYEN PHOTO)

Greener Pastures Eco Farm is bringing a pond to their property with the help of Ducks Unlimited this spring.

rather than kind of decompose and then go back into the atmosphere again," Carl explained. "The way we graze our cattle does that, but the wetland does it without any work and does it much more efficiently."

Andrea initially reached out to the Grand River Conservation Authority (GRCA) about planting trees to include

more native species. The dream of restoring the drained wetland on Greener Pastures was brought up and Ducks Unlimited became involved.

The GRCA and Ducks Unlimited helped with the grant writing and application process, from finding grants Greener Pastures could qualify for, telling the VanRooyens how much the

grants were worth and their deadlines, as well as clarifying information.

"They just took a lot of the legwork on so that we didn't have to, which was pretty fantastic," Andrea said. "We aren't grant writers. We don't specialize in that, and it can be pretty daunting sometimes when you're busy farming and doing other things to fit that in as well, so it really took all the guesswork out of things."

Ducks Unlimited required the initial earth work to be completed by the end of the month, as that is the last day of its fiscal year. Greener Pastures Eco Farm broke ground in February and the digging was done shortly after. Andrea said they had to wait for the snow to melt and the frost to come out of the ground this winter.

"Now a lot of the cleaning up earth work or the detail things still need to happen, so spreading out the topsoil to a thinner layer and then the next big step will be seeding in some native species, prairie grasses and things like that," she said.

Work to restore the wetland is expected to be completed by May. The final step will be installing a permanent fence around the pond to prevent livestock from accessing it. In a separate project, trees will be planted around the area.



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Steve Peters is new chair of Ontario Greenhouse Vegetable Growers

JEFF HELSDON

Echo Contributor

A familiar name and face is the new chair of the Ontario Greenhouse Vegetable Growers. Former Elgin-Middlesex-London MPP and minister of agriculture Steve Peters started in the role on Nov. 1.

Peters' primary responsibility will be as chairman of the board, meaning he will chair the meetings, be responsible for sub-committees, and represent greenhouse growers on Fruit and Veg Growers, and the Ontario Greenhouse Alliance.

"My role is a governance role," Peters said. "It also has a government advocacy role too, working particularly with Richard Lee, the executive director, and following through on directions of the board and to be an advocate."

Peters said the position needs someone with experience dealing with government abilities, who knows how to chair a meeting, and who ensures all board members have a say in any decision, much like a speaker or mayor.

He certainly has those qualifications. Before running for provincial politics, Peters was a St. Thomas councillor and mayor from 1991 to 1999. He was agriculture critic while in opposition from

1999 to 2003. He was appointed Minister of Agriculture and was then chosen by his colleagues as Speaker of the Ontario Legislature until he retired from provincial politics in 2011. Since then, he was the executive director of Food and Beverage Ontario and ran a farm market and bakery that provided opportunities for clients with the Canadian Mental Health Association running and is currently a councillor on St. Thomas city council.

"One of the reasons I applied is it's such a dynamic and growing industry," he said. "The potential for growth is huge. I represent OGVG on behalf of the board, for tomatoes, cucumbers and peppers. We're seeing a lot of those same farmers have moved to strawberries. Lettuce has been another large greenhouse growth sector."

Ontario is home to the largest concentration of greenhouses in North America, with most located in Southwestern Ontario.

"There was a lot of things that excited me about the industry," Peters said. "Part of my role is to deal with the challenges the sector faces as well."

He listed those challenges as carbon pricing, which has been a significant burden on the sector and added substantive costs to greenhouse produc-

tion; municipal issues; ensuring enough electricity; how greenhouses can play a role in co-generation; business risk management; and possible tariffs issued by President Trump.

Richard Lee, executive director of the Ontario Greenhouse Vegetable Growers, said the government's focus on tariffs seems to be on automotive, steel, and electric vehicles, but he questioned whether the government is doing

enough to represent the rights of the agriculture sector.

Overall, Canadian agriculture exports are worth \$40 billion annually. Of that total, the greenhouse sector contributes \$1.8 billion, or 532 million kilograms of exports. The majority of that is from Ontario.

Lee also identified challenges coming from municipal governments impacting the greenhouse sector.



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)





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Right to Repair: Farmers influential in prying open “digital locks” on electronics

DIANE BALTAZ

Echo Contributor

Two federal bills that recently received Royal Assent restore Canadians’ “right to repair” their own equipment, including tractors and combines, along with greater interoperability.

On Nov. 7, Bills C-244 and C-294 – the two bills intended to amend Canada’s Copyright Act -- received Royal Assent. These changes to the act allow circumvention of technological protection measures (TPMs) or “digital locks” in order to allow faster diagnosis, maintenance, repair and interoperability of Canadians’ technological tools, including the right to obtain parts from other companies.

Various lobby groups from across Canada, including the Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA), laud these bills as a critical step towards Canadian agriculture’s innovation and sustainability.

Bill C-244, introduced in 2022 by Wilson Miao, the Liberal MP for Richmond Centre in BC, allows

consumers and businesses to bypass TPMs such as encryption and password locks to access electronic components without having to travel to a dealership for repairs.

Bill C-294, introduced by Jeremy Patzer, Conservative MP for Saskatchewan’s Cypress Hills-Grasslands, focuses on the interoperability of different computer programs or devices in which they are embedded, including the right to purchase parts from other brands without violating copyright laws.

Simply put, this means that farmers can repair their equipment more easily without being forced to pay authorized dealers to diagnose and repair equipment, often at the additional cost of long waits. Equipment breakdowns became particularly detrimental during harvest periods, resulting in lost productivity.

“This is great,” exclaimed Brant-Haldimand-Norfolk OFA director Larry Davis of Burford. “We (OFA) have been asking the government for legislation that lets people make their own

repairs and run diagnostics without having to travel to a dealership. We want to fix things on our own farms ourselves right now, compared with waiting a week or two for a dealership to fix equipment, especially in the middle of harvest.”

“With interoperability, instead of taking my equipment to one colour machine dealer, I can now take it to another colour. We really need to try to work on repairs ourselves, on our own farms,” added Davis.

Proponents such as Western University’s assistant professor Alissa Centivany lauds the new laws’ benefits, including better longevity and care of equipment, minimized waste, improved farm productivity and Canadian food security.

Centivany has researched technology and copyright issues for decades. She co-founded the Canadian Repair Coalition (CanRepair) and testified on copyright’s impact on right-to-repair at parliamentary committees. She uses what she calls the “Three Cousins” to address systematic



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Right to repair advocate Alissa Centivany of Western University.

issues around consumer products: reparability, interoperability and durability.

While Bills C-244 and C-294 deal with copyright’s impact upon digital encryption on multiple products, Centivany’s advocacy focused on the misuse of copyright to stop repairs that can be done by equipment owners or local mechanics. She stated that she entered her work “through the farmer portal.”

“Farmers kicked it off – they need credit as they pushed this issue forward,” she said. “It began with

the USA farm movement. It went before state and federal legislatures and resulted in memorandums of understanding, and eventually legislation in a few states.”

Centivany explained these initial gains occurred in the United States because that is where the major farm equipment companies are headquartered. Because these companies are multinational in operation, Canadian farmers’ own advocacy gained momentum after the initial U.S. success. This occurred around 2016, she added.

“One must ask, what has copyright to do with farming?” said Centivany. “Computer codes get treated similarly to copyright on books, resulting in a ‘lock’, which farmers are not allowed to break even if the repair has nothing to do with the code.”

“Farmers are really sophisticated about their equipment and modifying it. We should let them keep doing what they’ve always done well,” she added.

Although critics call these bills a good step,

some advocates say that stand alone legislation is still needed for a more comprehensive right to repair. These include reforms in provincial consumer protection laws that require manufacturers to design products with ease of repairs without the fear of infringing upon various intellectual property rights.

“It’s still complicated as farmers need to get the tools,” said Davis. “There are some open dealers and repair shops to get these applications. These repairs aren’t only for farmers but also for other types of equipment.”

Centivany said that Canada remains behind Europe in right to repair issues. However, she said that Quebec passed Bill 29, which protects consumers from planned obsolescence and promotes reparability and durability of goods.

She added that the Ontario Legislature passed first reading on Bill 187, an act intended to protect right to repair items ranging from household appliances, wheel chairs and motorized vehicles, including heavy farming equipment.



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Golspie Dairy whole-milk vending machine provides farm-to-family opportunity

JEFF TRIBE

Echo Correspondent

There are likely less and less of us who grew up milking a cow by hand into a pail, pouring its contents through a paper filter, skimming off the cream and drinking the resultant raw milk from a pitcher.

Times change, there are many reasons this happens less. However, whether nostalgia or the rose-coloured glasses one tends to view their youth through, recollections are 'cow milk' compared to 'store bought' as favourably as premium ice cream to frozen ice milk.

Golspie Dairy (www.golspiedairy.ca) is providing a hyper-modern Dairy Farmers of Ontario (DFO) tested and pasteurized alternative to old-school methodology, connecting consumer to cow as directly as possible through a vending machine located on the family farming operation at 455259 45th Line, Woodstock.

"It's a different product," says Golspie Dairy's Marja DeBoer-Marshall. "Something you can't find in the grocery store."

DeBoer-Marshall was taking political science and global affairs when she met her future husband Laurence at The University of Waterloo, he studying biology. Their decision to return to his fifth, now sixth-generation family farm necessitated a career reassessment and financial discussion. Against the cost of expanding beyond its existing 30-cow milking herd, they instead diversified with an on-farm dairy combining award-winning cheese-making and a vending machine dispensing whole milk instead of drinks or snacks.

They had been exposed to the concept during visits to European farms, further research revealing there were 'a few in B.C. and one in Cape Breton.'

"That showed us it was a possibility here in Canada."

Their Brunimat dispenser is manufactured in Switzerland, shipped to Canada through a supplier in the



(JEFF TRIBE PHOTO)

Marja DeBoer-Marshall shows off one of the two Golspie Dairy cheeses earning awards at the past year's Royal Winter Fair.

Netherlands. The concept is fairly simple says DeBoer-Marshall, essentially a big refrigerator with pumps and an agitator to regularly mix milk, ensuring consistency throughout, rather than the cream rising to the top. While she considers the Canadian dairy system continues to provide the best milk in the world, the Golspie approach offers a whole milk alternative with associated content, texture and flavour benefits.

"It adds more body to the milk."

The milk is sourced from their own farm, requirements around the transportation of raw product requiring verification and samples for testing and quality assurance through the Dairy Farmers of Ontario milk marketing board.

"It ensures food safety is up to snuff and consum-

ers are protected," says DeBoer-Marshall.

Heated to complete the pasteurization process, milk is then chilled to four degrees Celsius. Golspie's self-serve area is open daily from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. A payment control on the front of a dispenser accepting coins or tap-enabled debit and credit cards allows customers to make their purchase. A second vending machine which accepts coins, \$20 bills and tap-enabled debit and credit cards contains assorted Golspie Dairy cheeses, extra bottles and caps, and pre-filled bottles of chocolate milk.

Consumers seeking milk place their own reusable container, or one from Golspie, into position, choosing between one quart (946 millilitre) or one gallon (3.78 litre) fills at \$3 and \$10 respectively. Originally, the dispenser was set up for one quart white or chocolate options. However, consumer preferences for all-white in different volumes encouraged a transition in March, 2024.

"We had customers who like to get a large volume of milk at one time," DeBoer-Marshall explained, adding that while having a preliminary business plan is essential, it must also be subject to demand. "You have to be flexible enough to respond to these changes."

After each sale, an automatic wash function cleans up any spillage.

"The dispenser is smart enough to keep itself clean."

Customers come regularly from as far away as London and the Kitchener-Waterloo area says DeBoer-Marshall, although she believes a majority are within a 10 to 15-minute drive.

Golspie Dairy does recognize the value of digital marketing in a modern world.

"We do some online advertising with keywords," she said, an investment pushing them toward the top of the page should someone happen to search 'fresh milk', for example. There is also benefit in producing a unique offering which for those who like it, tend to like it a lot and share their enjoyment through word-of-mouth.

"Honestly, that's the best kind of advertising, when people love your product and want to tell other people about it," said DeBoer-Marshall. "You can't pay for that quality of advertising."

There is no single easily-identifiable demographic among their clientele.

"Surprisingly, no. There is all sorts."

Some may pick up a quart or two a week, others a significantly larger amount. Many drink the milk, but there is also a percentage who prefer this option for making yogurt or cheese.

"It's been really interesting to talk to them and ask what they use the milk for."

Direct customer contact is among the most rewarding aspect of taking their business in a new direction, even on the rare occasions the feedback is negative.

"You can figure out a better product and better ways of doing things."

Overwhelmingly, reaction has been extremely positive. DeBoer-Marshall considers cheese-making awards from this year's Royal Winter Fair among indications they are on the right track, along with customer loyalty, enthusiasm and feedback. The latter has also provided a far-more intimate connection to the far-reaching impact of a single Canadian farm, even from what the dairy industry would consider a small operation.

"Our little farm feeds a lot of people," DeBoer-Marshall concluded. "It's not just for us and the cows, it touches a lot of lives every day."



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Eleventh annual Canadian Dairy XPO set for another successful year

CONNOR LUCZKA

Echo Correspondent

During its tenth year in existence in 2024, the Canadian Dairy XPO (CDX) had a record-setting 17,000 visitors come through its doors.

This year, founder Jordon Underhill is expecting to crack 18,000, a feat not lost on him.

“This is a really qualified crowd,” Underhill said about the sheer volume of people coming to the XPO. “We’re down to about 15,000 dairy farms in the entire country, not that we’re getting every dairy farm across the country coming to CDX, but it’s a huge percentage of the market share. It would be hard to find another event in the ag industry that brings such a big part of the market share and has this kind of impact on the industry. So that’s something that we’re proud of.”

Located just a stone’s throw away from Oxford County, in the heart of dairy country (Stratford, Ontario), CDX is Canada’s largest dairy showcase and brings the latest in innovation, education, and genetics to the many producers in this region and

abroad.

Underhill, himself a lifelong bovine farmer, told the Echo that in addition to an expected record-year in terms of attendees, they have reached pre-pandemic levels when it comes to exhibitors. Over 350 companies from around the globe are coming to the XPO, representing 30 different countries.

“Half of it is the success and momentum of the show and half of it is the success and momentum of the Canadian dairy industry,” Underhill said.

This is the first year CDX will be running since its acquisition by the German Agricultural Society (DLG), a non-profit organization based in Frankfurt, Germany. Underhill and DLG announced the acquisition in September of last year.

Underhill, who at the time of sale said that they agreed to the purchase because DLG didn’t want to make and “material changes” to the event, recently said that the location, organizing team, culture, planning, and spirit of the event has indeed remained the same.

This year, Underhill said that he is



(CONNOR LUCZKA PHOTO)

Cows line up in the Cow Coliseum during the 2024 Canadian Dairy XPO (CDX) last year. This year, founder Jordon Underhill expects to crack 18,000 guests coming through its doors.

excited for some returning favourite vendors as well as some new exhibits, such as two hoof trimming showcases

on both days of the XPO, where the latest in hoof trimming technology will be on display.

CONTINUED TO PAGE B19

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The cold, snowy winter that hit Ontario this year can only mean one thing — it's going to be a good year for maple syrup.

As Canada's second-largest maple syrup producing province, Ontario produces approximately 1.7 million litres of maple syrup each year, a carefully handcrafted and delectable natural treat that is an excellent replacement for sugar, a tasty sweetener and an irreplaceable topping.

"The sap is running in the maple trees and sugarbushes are opening across the province, offering tours, sweet maple treats and pancake breakfasts dripping in pure maple syrup," says Steve Brackenridge, maple syrup producer and director with the Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA). "The start of maple syrup season is a sure sign that spring isn't far away and it's a great opportunity

to visit some local farm businesses and enjoy the Home Grown goodness produced right here on our farms."

The OFA's Home Grown campaign raises awareness of the importance of preserving Ontario farmland to produce local food, fuel, flowers and fibre.

The first step to ensuring the maple syrup you are buying is from Ontario is to look for the "Sweet Ontario" label. This is an assurance that the nectar in the bottle is a true Ontario product reflecting the terroir or unique soils and climate of our province. It also means the sap was collected and boiled using clean, efficient technologies that support forest sustainability.

Buying Ontario maple syrup also preserves the traditional practices and heritage of maple syrup production in the province. Many of Ontario's maple syrup producers are family-owned businesses that have been passed down through generations, maintaining time-honoured methods of tapping

trees and boiling sap into tasty goodness.


"Sweet Ontario maple syrups have zero preservatives or additives, so rest assured, Ontario maple syrup is one of the most pure farm products around, offering a taste of Home Grown goodness that is unmatched by mass-produced alternatives," adds Brackenridge. "By choosing local, you are supporting these small businesses and helping to keep these traditions alive."

Curious to see it for yourself? Maple Syrup producers across Ontario will be welcoming guests on April 5 and 6 as part of Maple Weekend, offering visitors a glimpse behind the scenes of making maple syrup. Enjoy pancake breakfasts, hikes through sugarbush trails, maple sugar-making demonstrations, taffy on snow, and more. Many will also be offering free samples of fresh maple syrup and confections.


Check ontariomaple.com for recipes using pure Ontario maple syrup.



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS)




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How to stay safe on our farms

ANGELA CAMMAERT

Director, Ontario Federation of Agriculture

Staying safe at work is always important. That's especially true on Ontario's farms, which aren't just a workplace, it's also where those of us who farm live and raise our families.

Canadian Agricultural Safety Week was held recently, and as we look forward to the end of winter and start preparing for the busy spring planting season coming up, it's a great time to brush up on farm safety.

I farm with my family near West Lorne between London and Chatham, where we raise beef cattle and grow crops. I'm also a director on the board of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA).

Safety is important on our farm; it's something we've always taken seriously, especially when it comes to making sure our kids know how to stay safe. Some of the most tragic farm accidents every year involve children, and the entire farm community has a shared responsibility to make sure everyone knows how to keep kids safe.

We've taken our kids to farm safety days in our community, where different groups come together to offer training on hydro and lawn mower safety for example, as well as illustrating different ways accidents can happen and be prevented on the farm.

Our kids know to wear safety glasses, stay back from running farm equipment and make sure they can be seen by drivers. Safety boots are also important, and we have taught them to follow the same safety rules on other farms as they do at home.

As well, because we have livestock, we make sure they know how to behave around animals. This means not to be running in and out of pastures where livestock are grazing and to be particularly careful during calving and lambing time.

Baby animals are cute, but they're also likely to be watched over by a very protective cow or ewe who will step in to protect her young if she detects a threat.

Another important thing we've taught them is that grain bins and wagons aren't play places. It's easy for kids – and adults for that matter – to fall or become trapped inside, for example.

First responders aren't always trained or have the proper equipment to handle grain bin rescues, which is why the OFA, together with many of its county and regional federations has supported grain safety and rescue training for rural first responders in many parts of Ontario through its Revive Fund initiative.

Farm safety isn't just about kids, though. As adults, we also have a role to play in keeping ourselves and our farm employees safe.



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

Right now, before planting gets underway, is a great time of year to inspect and do maintenance on farm equipment to make sure everything is working correctly and safely. And while we're working, it's important to stay alert, avoid working when over-tired, and use proper protective gear like wearing highly visible vests.

Don't wear loose clothing around running equipment, keep long hair tied back, and don't walk around fields in the dark. As well, keep a first aid kit, a charged cell phone and emergency contact numbers handy in case an accident does happen.

To me, the other big part of farm safety involves safety on the roads. Every year, accidents happen involving farm equipment and cars and both farmers and motorists must do their part to keep

roads – and drivers – safe.

There are many initiatives underway across Ontario to improve road safety, including slow moving vehicle signage campaigns to help raise awareness of this important issue. For farmers, road safety means having proper signals and signage on their equipment and knowing the rules of the road.

And for motorists, keep in mind that farm vehicles can't drive as fast as you and sometimes the roads and shoulders aren't wide enough for us to move aside – so please be patient and pass only when it's safe (hills and curves are not safe!).

As we're busy planning for spring, it's important to make farm safety part of that plan. You'll find information and resources that can help on the OFA website.



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Eleventh annual Canadian Dairy XPO set for another successful year

CONTINUED FROM PAGE B16

Additionally, the product of the Canadian dairy industry will once again be prominent throughout. When his team started CDX they didn't know how integral that aspect would be to the show, but now having what the industry is all about front and centre, and the Gaylea/ 4-H Milk Parlour where guests can grab a grilled cheese and lounge throughout the day, is a huge aspect of the XPO.

CDX runs in the Stratford Rotary Complex April 2-3 from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Most of the show is geared for those in the industry; however, Chees-FEST, which takes place the first day from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m., is a day wherein the public can come and sample Canadian cheese and see what the Canadi-

an dairy industry has to offer.

After that, starting at 7 p.m. the Calves for a Cause live auction takes over the WeCover Cow Coliseum behind the Rotary Complex, with all proceeds in support of the London Children's Hospital.

Returning this year is the second annual Canadian Dairy Business Conference on April 1. It's a one day high-impact training day for dairy producers conveniently scheduled between milking times. As Underhill said, operations are getting larger, innovation is rapidly increasing, and having an event focused on the business side of agriculture was a huge success last year when they first ran it.

Investing in farm safety



(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

It's no secret that health and safety practices are crucial for safeguarding everyone on the farm. But did you know that they're also good for business?

Effective and proactive health and safety measures are integral to having a thriving farming operation.

Develop a detailed safety plan that aligns with your farm. Be sure to address all health and safety considerations, including identifying potential new stressors.

Not only will having a safety plan

unique to your farm help keep everyone safe during everyday work, but it is also essential for emergency preparedness so that you have a plan in place if disaster strikes.

Remember an investment in health and safety, is an investment in your farm's future.

This Canadian Agricultural Safety Week, March 16-22, commit to prioritizing farm safety every day. For more information, please visit agsafetyweek.ca.

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